

by the same author



POEMS

OUT OF THE PICTURE

THE EARTH COMPELS

AUTUMN JOURNAL

PLANT AND PHANTOM

poems by
LOUIS MACNEICE

Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square
London

*First published in April Mcmxli
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square London W.C. 1
Printed in Great Britain by
R. MacLehose and Company Limited
The University Press Glasgow
All rights reserved*

To
ELEANOR CLARK

ein Zwiespalt und Zwitter von Pflanze und von Gespenst

NIETZSCHE

Contents

PROGNOSIS	<i>page</i> 13
STYLITE	15
CONVERSATION	16
DEPARTURE PLATFORM	17
PLANT AND PHANTOM	19
ENTIRELY	21
THE BRITISH MUSEUM READING ROOM	22
LONDON RAIN	23
PICTURE GALLERIES	26
TRILOGY FOR X	28
THE COMING OF WAR	33
MEETING POINT	40
A TOAST	42
ORDER TO VIEW	43
NOVELETTES:	
THE OLD STORY	45
SUICIDE	46
LES SYLPHIDES	47
THE GARDENER	49
CHRISTINA	52
THE EXPERT	53
PROVENCE	54
THE PREACHER	55
DÉBÂCLE	57
EXILE	58
DEATH OF AN ACTRESS	59
BAR-ROOM MATINS	61

FLIGHT OF THE HEART	<i>page</i> 63
REFUGEES	64
JEHU	66
O'CONNELL BRIDGE	68
THE DEATH-WISH	69
AUTOBIOGRAPHY	70
THE EAR	72
EVENING IN CONNECTICUT	73
OCTETS:	
BUSINESS MEN	75
NIGHT CLUB	76
DIDYMUS	77
PLURALITY	78
PLAIN SPEAKING	81
PERDITA	82
THE DOWSER	83
THE RETURN	85
CRADLE SONG	86

Acknowledgments

The Spectator, The New Statesman and Nation, The Times Literary Supplement, New Writing, The Listener, Horizon.

The New Republic, The Nation, Poetry (Chicago), The Kenyon Review, The New Yorker, Harper's Bazaar, Furioso, The Partisan Review.

Several of these poems have appeared previously in *The Last Ditch*, published by the Cuala Press

Prognosis

Goodbye, Winter,
The days are getting longer,
The tea-leaf in the teacup
Is herald of a stranger.

Will he bring me business
Or will he bring me gladness
Or will he come for cure
Of his own sickness?

With a pedlar's burden
Walking up the garden
Will he come to beg
Or will he come to bargain?

Will he come to pester,
To cringe or to bluster,
A promise in his palm
Or a gun in his holster?

Will his name be John
Or will his name be Jonah
Crying to repent
On the Island of Iona?

Will his name be Jason
Looking for a seaman
Or a mad crusader
Without rhyme or reason?

What will be his message—
War or work or marriage?
News as new as dawn
Or an old adage?

Will he give a champion
Answer to my question
Or will his words be dark
And his ways evasion?

Will his name be Love
And all his talk be crazy?
Or will his name be Death
And his message easy?

Spring, 1939

Stylite

The saint on the pillar stands,
The pillar is alone,
He has stood so long
That he himself is stone;
Only his eyes
Range across the sand
Where no-one ever comes
And the world is banned.

Then his eyes close,
He stands in his sleep,
Round his neck there comes
The conscience of a rope,
And the hangman counting
Counting to ten—
At nine he finds
He has eyes again.

The saint on the pillar stands,
The pillars are two,
A young man opposite
Stands in the blue,
A white Greek god,
Confident, with curled
Hair above the groin
And his eyes on the world.

March, 1940

Conversation

Ordinary people are peculiar too:
Watch the vagrant in their eyes
Who sneaks away while they are talking with you
Into some black wood behind the skull,
Following un-, or other, realities,
Fishing for shadows in a pool.

But sometimes the vagrant comes the other way
Out of their eyes and into yours
Having mistaken you perhaps for yesterday
Or for tomorrow night, a wood in which
He may pick up among the pine-needles and burrs
The lost purse, the dropped stitch.

Vagrancy however is forbidden; ordinary men
Soon come back to normal, look you straight
In the eyes as if to say 'It will not happen again',
Put up a barrage of common sense to baulk
Intimacy but by mistake interpolate
Swear-words like roses in their talk.

March, 1940

Departure Platform

Love, my love, it is high time to travel,
The brass bell clangs escape
And summer in a porter's cap will punch our tickets
And launch us where the shining lines unravel.

We have been there before though we have not seen it—
The land that was always ours
Whose stones are our bones', whose rivers our blood's
kindred,
A land without a meaning unless we mean it.

The distance opens like a mouth to meet us
Wantonly tongue to tongue
Consummating our dreams by night, defeating
The daily thoughts which day by day defeat us.

And on this quest in company with many
We hoard our hopes a year
To blow in a fortnight—a dandelion puffball
Telling the past time and the spent penny.

So pack like the others, be sure you look your best for
This year's unlikely chance;
Whether it is France or Wales or the Canary Islands
The place—who knows—is a person to be well-dressed
for.

Unlikely; and, were that so, I should be jealous
Unless that god of the place
Could fuse his person with mine for your enjoyment—
But whether he could there is nobody can tell us.

But on the off chance pack—your summer frocks and
sandals

And a pair of gloves for towns
And one small bottle of scent—Chanel or Coty—
And your long ear-rings twisted like Christmas candles.

It leaves at three-fifteen—with lifting pistons—

The zero hour;

Opposite in corner seats we hope for nearness

And dearness in what is wrongly called the distance.

July, 1938

Plant and Phantom

Man: a flutter of pages,
Leaves in the Sibyl's cave,
Shadow changing from dawn to twilight,
"Murmuration" of corn in the wind,
A shaking of hands with hallucinations,
Hobnobbing with ghosts, a pump of blood,
Mirage, a spider dangling
Over chaos and man a chaos.

Who cheats the 'pawky' Fates
By what he does, not is,
By what he makes, imposing
On flux an architectonic—
Cone of marble, calyx of ice,
Spandrel and buttress, iron
Loops across the void,
Stepping stones in the random.

Man: a dance of midges,
Gold glass in the sunlight,
Prattle of water, palaver
Of starlings in a disused
Chimney, a gimcrack castle,
Seaweed tugging the rocks,
Guttering candles, the Northern
Lights and the Seventh Wave.

Whose life is a bluff, professing
To follow the laws of Nature,
In fact a revolt, a mad
Conspiracy and usurpation,

Smuggling over the frontier
Of fact a sense of value,
Metabolism of death,
Re-orchestration of world.

Man: a riot of banners,
Bulge in the wind, a prism,
Organ-pipes in the sunset,
Orgy of brains and glands,
Thunder-crackle and the bounce of hail,
Wink of wings and fog's delusion,
A rampant martyr, a midnight
Echo, a forest fire.

Who felt with his hands in empty
Air for the Word and did not
Find it but felt the aura,
Dew on the skin, could not forget it.
Ever since has fumbled, intrigued,
Clambered behind and beyond, and learnt
Words of blessing and cursing, hoping
To find in the end the Word Itself.

September, 1940

Entirely

If we could get the hang of it entirely
It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
And falling twigs of song,
And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
Presences it is rarely
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
Even a phrase entirely.

If we could find our happiness entirely
In somebody else's arms
We should not fear the spears of the spring nor the city's
Yammering fire alarms
But, as it is, the spears each year go through
Our flesh and almost hourly
Bell or siren banishes the blue
Eyes of Love entirely.

And if the world were black or white entirely
And all the charts were plain
Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
A prism of delight and pain,
We might be surer where we wished to go
Or again we might be merely
Bored but in brute reality there is no
Road that is right entirely.

March, 1940

The British Museum Reading Room

Under the hive-like dome the stooping haunted readers
Go up and down the alleys, tap the cells of knowledge—

Honey and wax, the accumulation of years—
Some on commission, some for the love of learning,
Some because they have nothing better to do
Or because they hope these walls of books will deaden
The drumming of the demon in their ears.

Cranks, hacks, poverty-stricken scholars,
In pince-nez, period hats or romantic beards
And cherishing their hobby or their doom
Some are too much alive and some are asleep
Hanging like bats in a world of inverted values,
Folded up in themselves in a world which is safe and
silent:

This is the British Museum Reading Room.

Out on the steps in the sun the pigeons are courting,
Puffing their ruffs and sweeping their tails or taking
A sun-bath at their ease
And under the totem poles—the ancient terror—
Between the enormous fluted Ionic columns
There seeps from heavily jowled or hawk-like foreign
faces

The guttural sorrow of the refugees.

July, 1939

London Rain

The rain of London pimples
The ebony street with white
And the neon-lamps of London
Stain the canals of night
And the park becomes a jungle
In the alchemy of night.

My wishes turn to violent
Horses black as coal—
The randy mares of fancy,
The stallions of the soul—
Eager to take the fences
That fence about my soul.

Across the countless chimneys
The horses ride and across
The country to the channel
Where warning beacons toss,
To a place where God and No-God
Play at pitch and toss.

Whichever wins I am happy
For God will give me bliss
But No-God will absolve me
From all I do amiss
And I need not suffer conscience
If the world was made amiss.

Under God we can reckon
On pardon when we fall
But if we are under No-God

Nothing will matter at all,
Adultery and murder
Will count for nothing at all

So reinforced by logic
As having nothing to lose
My lust goes riding horseback
To ravish where I choose,
To burgle all the turrets
Of beauty as I choose.

But now the rain gives over
Its dance upon the town,
Logic and lust together
Come dimly tumbling down,
And neither God nor No-God
Is either up or down.

The argument was wilful,
The alternatives untrue,
We need no metaphysics
To sanction what we do
Or to muffle us in comfort
From what we did not do.

Whether the living river
Began in bog or lake,
The world is what was given,
The world is what we make.
And we only can discover
Life in the life we make.

So let the water sizzle
Upon the gleaming slates,
There will be sunshine after
When the rain abates
And rain returning duly
When the sun abates.

My wishes now come homeward,
Their gallopings in vain,
Logic and lust are quiet
And again it starts to rain;
Falling asleep I listen
To the falling London rain.

July, 1939

Picture Galleries

Strolling, guidebook in hand, along the varnished par-
quet

We meet the calm of opium in the long galleries,
An under-water dream, a closed

World whose people live in frames, the flames of their
self-centred

Affections frozen, the bread and fruit on their tables
fossil,

A curfew—once for all—imposed

Upon their might-be-wanderings; their might-be
applications

For resurrection in advance refused.

Yet were violent monsters, whom the retiring ocean
Left embedded in sandstone: Michelangelo's tortured

Urge to God, Greco's fugue of fire,

Goya's sleight-of-hand that fooled his patrons, Blake's
ingenuous

Usurpation of reality, Daumier watching the bubbles
rising

From mouths of the drowned; panic, desire,

Fantasy, joy of the earth—the rhythm lurks in the canvas,
sometimes.

If we look long, is more than we can bear.

Or viewed as history they remind us of what we always

Would rather forget—that what we are or prefer is
conditioned

By circumstances, that evil and good

Are relative to ourselves who are creatures of period;
seeing

That what, for instance, Zurbaran found in his
Carthusians

Serene in white, with rope girdle and hood,
Lautrec discovered in brothel and circus; the answers
were even
Even though we to-day may find them odd.

A curator rings a bell: tourists, connoisseurs and loafers;
School-children with their teachers, hustle for the door,
many

Of their faces tired or showing relief
At leaving a silence which was a crowd of voices, the
language,
Like that of a paralytic hard to follow; they descend the
staircase

Into the open air, a sheaf
Of inklings fluttering in their minds, and now even the
open
Air is half-articulate and unsafe.

August, 1940

Trilogy for X

I

When clerks and navvies fondle
Beside canals their wenches,
In rapture or in coma
The haunches that they handle,
And the orange moon sits idle
Above the orchard slanted—
Upon such easy evenings
We take our loves for granted.

But when, as now, the creaking
Trees on the hills of London
Like bison charge their neighbours
In wind that keeps us waking
And in the draught the scolloped
Lampshade swings a shadow,
We think of love bound over—
The mortgage on the meadow.

And one lies lonely, haunted
By limbs he half remembers,
And one, in wedlock, wonders
Where is the girl he wanted;
And some sit smoking, flicking
The ash away and feeling
For love gone up like vapour
Between the floor and ceiling.

But now when winds are curling
The trees do you come closer,
Close as an eyelid fasten
My body in darkness, darling;

Switch the light off and let me
Gather you up and gather
The power of trains advancing
Further, advancing further.

II

And love hung still as crystal over the bed
And filled the corners of the enormous room;
The boom of dawn that left her sleeping, showing
The flowers mirrored in the mahogany table.

O my love, if only I were able
To protract this hour of quiet after passion,
Not ration happiness but keep this door for ever
Closed on the world, its own world closed within it.

But dawn's waves trouble with the bubbling minute,
The names of books come clear upon their shelves,
The reason delves for duty and you will wake
With a start and go on living on your own.

The first train passes and the windows groan,
Voices will hector and your voice become
A drum in tune with theirs, which all last night
Like sap that fingered through a hungry tree
Asserted our one night's identity.

III

March gave clear days,
Gave unaccustomed sunshine,
Prelude to who knows
What dead end or downfall;
O my love, to
Browse in the painted prelude.

Regent's Park was
Gay with ducks and deck-chairs,
Omens were absent,
Cooks bought cloves and parsley;
O my love, to
Stop one's ear to omens.

Pigeons courting, the cock
Like an eighteenth-century marquis
Puffing his breast and dragging
His fantail waltzwise;
O my love, the
Southward trains are puffing.

Nursemaids gossiped,
Sun was bright on pram-paint,
Gold in the breeze the arrow
Swivelled on church-tops;
But Living drains the living
Sieve we catch our gold in.

Toy sail skidding on Whitestone
Pond at the peak of London,

Challenge of bells at morning,
Crocus and almond;
O my love, my
Thoughts avoid the challenge.

But the rumbling summer rolls
A register behind us—
March to April to May
To denser summer—
And the road is dusty, the goal
Unknown we march to.

Rampant on Europe headlines
Herald beasts of fable;
Backward the eyes to ancient
Codes—vellum and roseleaf;
From the moving train of time the
Fields move backward.

And now the searchlights
Play their firemen's hoses,
Evil their purport
Though their practice lovely,
Defence and death being always
Collateral, coæval.

And now the soldier
Tightens belt and outlook,
Eyes on the target,
Mind in the trigger-finger,
And a flight of lead connecting
Self and horizon.

And now, and last, in London
Poised on the edge of absence
I ask for a moment's mention
Of days the days will cancel,
Though the long run may also
Bring what we ask for.

Summer, 1938

The Coming of War

(Dublin, Cushendun, the West of Ireland, and back)

I

Dublin

Grey brick upon brick,
Declamatory bronze
On sombre pedestals—
O'Connell, Grattan, Moore—
And the brewery tugs and the swans
On the balustraded stream
And the bare bones of a fanlight
Over a hungry door
And the air soft on the cheek
And porter running from the taps
With a head of yellow cream
And Nelson on his pillar
Watching his world collapse.

This was never my town,
I was not born nor bred
Nor schooled here and she will not
Have me alive or dead
But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Regency façades—
The catcalls and the pain,
The glamour of her squalor,
The bravado of her talk.

The lights jig in the river
With a concertina movement
And the sun comes up in the morning
Like barley-sugar on the water
And the mist on the Wicklow hills
Is close, as close
As the peasantry were to the landlord,
As the Irish to the Anglo-Irish,
As the killer is close one moment
To the man he kills,
Or as the moment itself
Is close to the next moment.

She is not an Irish town
And she is not English,
Historic with guns and vermin
And the cold renown
Of a fragment of Church latin,
Of an oratorical phrase.
But O the days are soft,
Soft enough to forget
The lesson better learnt,
The bullet on the wet
Streets, the crooked deal,
The steel behind the laugh,
The Four Courts burnt.

Fort of the Dane,
Garrison of the Saxon,
Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought,

You give me time for thought
And by a juggler's trick
You poise the toppling hour—
O greyness run to flower,
Grey stone, grey water
And brick upon grey brick.

II

Cushendun

Fuchsia and ragweed and the distant hills
Made as it were out of clouds and sea:
All night the bay is plashing and the moon
Marks the break of the waves.

Limestone and basalt and a whitewashed house
With passages of great stone flags
And a walled garden with plums on the wall
And a bird piping in the night.

Forgetfulness: brass lamps and copper jugs
And home-made bread and the smell of turf or flax
And the air a glove and the water lathering easy
And convolvulus in the hedge.

Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
What a place to talk of War.

III

County Sligo

In Sligo the country was soft; there were turkeys
Gobbling under sycamore trees
And the shadows of clouds on the mountains moving
Like browsing cattle at ease.

And little distant fields were sprigged with haycocks
And splashed against a white
Roadside cottage a welter of nasturtium
Deluging the sight,

And pullets pecking the flies from around the eyes of
heifers
Sitting in farmyard mud
Among hydrangeas and the falling ear-rings
Of fuchsias red as blood.

But in Mayo the tumbledown walls went leap-frog
Over the moors,
The sugar and salt in the pubs were damp in the casters
And the water was brown as beer upon the shores

Of desolate loughs, and stumps of hoary bog-oak
Stuck up here and there
And as the twilight filtered on the heather
Water-music filled the air,

And when the night came down upon the bogland
With all-enveloping wings
The coal-black turfstacks rose against the darkness
Like the tombs of nameless kings.

IV

Galway

O the crossbones of Galway,
The hollow grey houses,
The rubbish and sewage,
The grass-grown pier,
And the dredger grumbling
All night in the harbour:
The war came down on us here.

Salmon in the Corrib
Gently swaying
And the water combed out
Over the weir
And a hundred swans
Dreaming on the harbour:
The war came down on us here.

The night was gay
With the moon's music
But Mars was angry
On the hills of Clare
And September dawned
Upon willows and ruins:
The war came down on us here.

V

Clonmacnois

Eastward again, returning to our so-called posts,
We went out of our way to look at Clonmacnois—
A huddle of tombs and ruins of anonymous men
Above the Shannon dreaming in the quiet rain.

You millenarian dead, why should I arraign,
Being a part of it, the stupidity of men
Who cancel the voices of the heart with barbarous noise
And hide the barren facts of death in censored posts?

VI

Cushendun Again

The sky is a lather of stars,
Jupiter makes a stain upon the bay
But death is on the waters and no-one
Can drive the war away.

The black horns of the headlands
Grip my gullet tight;
There is a dead calf on the beach
Like a black sack in the night

The tide is out and the idle
Starlit wavelets play
But none of any of all the stars above me
Can drive the war away.

VII

Why, now it has happened,
Should the clock go on striking to the firedogs
And why should the rooks be blown upon the evening
Like burnt paper in a chimney?

And why should the sea maintain its turbulence,
Its elegance,

And draw a film of muslin down the sand
With each receding wave?

And why, now it has happened,
Should the atlas still be full of the maps of countries
We never shall see again?

And why, now it has happened,
And doom all night is lapping at the door,
Should I remember that I ever met you—
Once in another world?

August–September, 1939

Meeting Point

Time was away and somewhere else,
There were two glasses and two chairs
And two people with the one pulse
(Somebody stopped the moving stairs):
Time was away and somewhere else.

And they were neither up nor down,
The stream's music did not stop
Flowing through heather, limpid brown,
Although they sat in a coffee shop
And they were neither up nor down.

The bell was silent in the air
Holding its inverted poise—
Between the clang and clang a flower,
A brazen calyx of no noise:
The bell was silent in the air.

The camels crossed the miles of sand
That stretched around the cups and plates;
The desert was their own, they planned
To portion out the stars and dates:
The camels crossed the miles of sand.

Time was away and somewhere else.
The waiter did not come, the clock
Forgot them and the radio waltz
Came out like water from a rock:
Time was away and somewhere else.

Her fingers flicked away the ash
That bloomed again in tropic trees:
Not caring if the markets crash
When they had forests such as these,
Her fingers flicked away the ash.

God or whatever means the Good
Be praised that time can stop like this,
That what the heart has understood
Can verify in the body's peace
God or whatever means the Good.

Time was away and she was here
And life no longer what it was,
The bell was silent in the air
And all the room a glow because
Time was away and she was here.

April, 1939

A Toast

urred and drawled and crooning sounds,
urred and suave and sidling smells,
bs of dew, the bells of buds,
n going down in crimson suds—
is on me and these are yours.

and and sculpted and urgent beasts,
ere and there and nowhere birds,
ngues of fire, the words of foam,
rdling stars in the night's dome—
s is on me and these are yours.

ice and grace and muscle of man
alance of his body and mind,
keeps a trump behind his brain
istinct flicks it out again—
is is on me and these are yours.

ourage of eyes, the craft of hands,
gay feet, the pulse of hope,
will that flings a rope—though hard—
tch the future off its guard—
is is on me and these are yours.

luck and pluck and plunge of blood,
wealth and spilth and sport of breath,
sleep come down like death above
fever and the peace of love—
his is on me and these are yours.

May, 1939

Order to view

It was a big house, bleak;
Grass on the drive;
We had been there before
But memory, weak in front of
A blistered door, could find
Nothing alive now;
The shrubbery dripped, a crypt
Of leafmould dreams; a tarnished
Arrow over an empty stable
Shifted a little in the almost wind,

And wishes were unable
To rise; on the garden wall
The pear trees had come loose
From rotten loops; one wish,
A rainbow bubble, rose,
Faltered, broke in the dull
Air—What was the use?
The bell-pull would not pull
And the whole place, one might
Have supposed, was deadly ill:
The world was closed,

And remained closed until
A sudden angry tree
Shook itself like a setter
Flouncing out of a pond
And beyond the sombre line
Of limes a cavalcade
Of clouds rose like a shout of
Defiance. Near at hand

where in a loose-box
e neighed
l the curtains flew out of
indows; the world was open.

March, 1940

Novelettes

I

The Old Story

The old story is true of charms fading;
He knew her first before her charm was mellow—
Slim; surprise in her eyes; like a woodland creature
Crept abroad who found the world amazing,

Who, afterwards maturing, yet was dainty,
Light on her feet and gentle with her fingers;
Put on a little flesh, became an easy
Spreadeagled beauty for Renaissance painters.

And then she went; he did not see her after
Until by the shore of a cold sea in winter
With years behind her and the waves behind her
Drubbing the memory up and down the pebbles.

Flotsam and wrack; the bag of old emotions;
Watch in the swirl her ten years back reflections—
White as a drowning hand, then gone for ever;
Here she stands who was twenty and is thirty.

The same but different and he found the difference
A surgeon's knife without an anaesthetic;
He had known of course that this happens
But had not guessed the pain of it or the panic,
And could not say 'My love', could hardly
Say anything at all, no longer knowing
Whom he was talking to but watched the water
Massing for action on the cold horizon.

Summer, 1939

II

Suicide

He had fought for the wrong causes,
Had married the wrong wife,
Had invested rashly, had lost
His health and his reputation,
His fortune and his looks.

Who in his youth had gone
Walking on the crown of the road
Under delectable trees
And over irresponsible moors
To find the rainbow's end;

And was now, at fortynine,
Living in a half timbered
Cottage with a pale
Mistress and some gardening
Books and a life of Napoleon.

When she left him he took
The shears and clipped the hedge
And then taking a shotgun
As if for duck went out
Walking on the crown of the road.

Summer, 1939

III

Les Sylphides

Life in a day: he took his girl to the ballet;
Being shortsighted himself could hardly see it—
The white skirts in the grey
Glade and the swell of the music
Lifting the white sails.

Calyx upon calyx, canterbury bells in the breeze
The flowers on the left mirror to the flowers on the right
And the naked arms above
The powdered faces moving
Like seaweed in a pool.

Now, he thought, we are floating—ageless, oarless—
Now there is no separation, from now on
You will be wearing white
Satin and a red sash
Under the waltzing trees.

But the music stopped, the dancers took their curtain,
The river had come to a lock—a shuffle of programmes—
And we cannot continue down
Stream unless we are ready
To enter the lock and drop.

So they were married—to be the more together—
And found they were never again so much together,
Divided by the morning tea,
By the evening paper,
By children and tradesmen's bills.

Waking at times in the night she found assurance
In his regular breathing but wondered whether
It was really worth it and where
The river had flowed away
And where were the white flowers.

Summer, 1939

IV

The Gardener

He was not able to read or write,
He did odd jobs on gentlemen's places
Cutting the hedge or hoeing the drive
With the smile of a saint,
With the pride of a feudal chief,
For he was not quite all there.

Crippled by rheumatism
By the time his hair was white,
He would reach the garden by twelve
His legs in soiled puttees,
A clay pipe in his teeth,
A tiny flag in his cap
A white cat behind him,
And his eyes a cornflower blue.

And between the clack of the shears
Or the honing of the scythe
Or the rattle of the rake on the gravel
He would talk to amuse the children,
He would talk to himself or the cat
Or the robin waiting for worms
Perched on the handle of the spade;
Would remember snatches of verse
From the elementary school
About a bee and a wasp
Or the cat by the barndoor spinning;
And would talk about himself for ever—
You would never find his like—
Always in the third person;

And would level his stick like a gun
(With a glint in his eye)
Saying 'Now I'm a Frenchman'—
He was not quite right in the head.

He believed in God—
The Good Fellow Up There—
And he used a simile of Homer
Watching the falling leaves,
And every year he waited for the Twelfth of July,
Cherishing his sash and his fife
For the carnival of banners and drums.
He was always claiming but never
Obtaining his old age pension,
For he did not know his age.
And his rheumatism at last
Kept him out of the processions.
And he came to work in the garden
Later and later in the day,
Leaving later at night;
In the damp dark of the night
At ten o'clock or later
You could hear him mowing the lawn,
The mower moving forward
And backward, forward and backward
For he mowed while standing still;
He was not quite up to the job.

But he took a pride in the job,
He kept a bowl of cold
Tea in the crotch of a tree,
Always enjoyed his food
And enjoying honing the scythe

And making the potato drills
And putting the peasticks in;
And enjoyed the noise of the corncrake,
And the early hawthorn hedge
Peppered black and green,
And the cut grass dancing in the air—
Happy as the day was long.

Till his last sickness took him
And he could not leave his house
And his eyes lost their colour
And he sat by the little range
With a finch in a cage and a framed
Certificate of admission
Into the Orange Order,
And his speech began to wander
And memory ebbed
Leaving upon the shore
Odd shells and heads of wrack
And his soul went out on the ebbing
Tide in a trim boat
To find the Walls of Derry
Or the land of the Ever Young.

Summer, 1939

V

Christina

It all began so easy
With bricks upon the floor
Building motley houses
And knocking down your houses
And always building more.

The doll was called Christina,
Her under-wear was lace,
She smiled while you dressed her
And when you then undressed her
She kept a smiling face.

Until the day she tumbled
And broke herself in two
And her legs and arms were hollow
And her yellow head was hollow
Behind her eyes of blue.

He went to bed with a lady
Somewhere seen before
He heard the name Christina
And suddenly saw Christina
Dead on the nursery floor.

July, 1939

VI

The Expert

The dilatory prophet, flicking the ash
On the Bokhara rug, said 'Maybe yes;
When spring comes the markets will maybe crash,
Only the Unknown God can get us out of this mess.

Man is a political animal admittedly
But, politics being incalculable, I shall
With your permission pour myself another; I see
Nothing for it but to be animal.'

And putting the weight of his doctorates aside
Took three fingers of Scotch and a cube of ice
And thought that, could he announce that he had died,
And so was no longer an expert, it would be nice;

And drank till two, staring into the fire
Seeing half-naked girls, and then having collected
His courtesy and his hat, soft-peddalling desire
Went out to find the world as bad as he expected.

Drunk and alone among the indifferent lights
In stark unending streets of granite and glass
He ducked his head to avoid illusory stalactites
And fell, his brain ringing with the noise of brass

Captions; the groundswell of the pavement, steady
As fate, rose up and caught him, rolled him below
A truck—this ex-professor who had already
Outlived his job of being in the know.

March, 1940

VII

Provence

It is a decade now since he and she
Spent September in Provence: the vineyard
Was close about the house; mosquitoes and cicadas
Garrulous day and night; and by the sea
Thighs and shoulders tanning themselves and one
Gay old man in particular who never
Missed a day, a glutton for the sun,
But did not bathe. He and she with swimming
Every noon were wild for food; a Basque
Woman cooked on charcoal—aubergine with garlic,
And there were long green grapes exploding on the palate
And smelling of eau de Cologne. They had nothing to ask
Except that it should go on. Watching the vintage—
A file of bullock carts and the muzzle of each
Animal munching purple—he suddenly said
'We must get married soon.' Down on the beach,
His wife and three of his three children dead,
An old man lay in the sun, perfectly happy.

September, 1940

VIII

The Preacher

He carried a ball of darkness with him, unrolled it
To find his way by in streets and rooms,
Every train or boat he took was Charon's ferry,
He never left the Catacombs;

He never smiled but spun his strands of black
Among the secular crowd who, when he tripped their feet
Saw their own faces in the wet street, saw
Their hell beneath the street.

Among old iron, cinders, sizzling dumps,
A world castrated, amputated, trepanned,
He walked in the lost acres crying 'Repent
For the Kingdom of Death is at hand'.

He took the books of pagan art and read
Between the lines or worked them out to prove
Humanism a palimpsest and God's
Anger a more primal fact than love.

And in the city at night where drunken song
Climbed the air like tendrils of vine
He bared a knife and slashed the roots and laid
Another curse on Cain. The sign

Of the cross between his eyes, his mouth drawn down,
He passed the flower-sellers and all
The roses reeked of an abattoir, the gardenias
Became the décor of a funeral.

ys clenched, an eagle
of vice;
uilt, block upon block,
f sacrifice.

e in a bare room
is accounts; lying in bed
e his deeds, drew back
ed thread,

1 the chink beneath the door,
him, all
spair a ball of black
he centre of the ball.

March, 1940

Débâcle

They had built it up—but not for this the lean
And divinatory years,
The red-eyed pioneers
Facing the dark and making the desert green.

Not for this the pale inventor's lamp
Alight till dawn, the hands
Weary with sifting sands,
The burst of nuggets on the miners' camp.

Vision and sinew made it of light and stone;
Not grateful nor enchanted
Their heirs took it for granted
Having a world—a world that was all their own.

At sundown now the windows had gone gold
For half an hour; a quick
Chill came off the brick
Walls and the flesh was suddenly old and cold.

Crumbling between the fingers, under the feet,
Crumbling behind the eyes,
Their world gives way and dies
And something twangs and breaks at the end of the street.

September, 1940

Exile

Now he can hardly press
The heavy pedals of thought,
Tired of what he wants
And sick of what he ought,
He is content to watch
The window fill with snow
Making even the Future
Seem long ago.

Knowing that in Europe
All the streets are black
And that stars of blood
Star the almanac,
One half-hour's reprieve
Drowns him in the white
Physical or spiritual
Inhuman night.

March, 1940

Death of an Actress

I see from the paper that Florrie Forde is dead—
Collapsed after singing to wounded soldiers,
At the age of sixty-five. The American notice
Says no doubt all that need be said

About this one-time chorus girl; whose rôle
For more than forty stifling years was giving
Sexual, sentimental, or comic entertainment,
A gaudy posy for the popular soul.

Plush and cigars: she waddled into the lights,
Old and huge and painted, in velvet and tiara,
Her voice gone but around her head an aura
Of all her vanilla-sweet forgotten vaudeville nights.

With an elephantine shimmy and a sugared wink
She threw a trellis of Dorothy Perkins roses
Around an audience come from slum and suburb
And weary of the tea-leaves in the sink;

Who found her songs a rainbow leading west
To the home they never had, to the chocolate Sunday
Of boy and girl, to cowslip time, to the never-
Ending weekend Islands of the Blest.

In the Isle of Man before the war before
The present one she made a ragtime favourite
Of 'Tipperary', which became the swan-song
Of troop-ships on a darkened shore;

And during Munich sang her ancient quiz
Of *Where's Bill Bailey?* and the chorus answered,
Muddling through and glad to have no answer:
Where's Bill Bailey? How do *we* know where he is!

Now on a late and bandaged April day
In a military hospital Miss Florrie
Forde has made her positively last appearance
And taken her bow and gone correctly away.

Correctly. For she stood
For an older England, for children toddling
Hand in hand while the day was bright. Let the wren and
 robin
Gently with leaves cover the Babes in the Wood.

May, 1940

Bar-Room Matins

Popcorn peanuts clams and gum:
We whose Kingdom has not come
Have mouths like men but still are dumb

Who only deal with Here and Now
As circumstances may allow:
The sponsored programme tells us how.

And yet the preachers tell the pews
What man misuses God can use:
Give us this day our daily news

That we may hear behind the brain
And through the sullen heat's migraine
The atavistic voice of Cain:

'Who entitled you to spy
From your easy heaven? Am I
My brother's keeper? Let him die.'

And God in words we soon forget
Answers through the radio set:
'The curse is on his forehead yet.'

Mass destruction, mass disease:
We thank thee, Lord, upon our knees
That we were born in times like these

When with doom tumbling from the sky
Each of us has an alibi
For doing nothing—Let him die.

Let him die, his death will be
A drop of water in the sea,
A journalist's commodity.

Pretzels crackers chips and beer:
Death is something that we fear
But it titillates the ear.

Anchovy almond ice and gin:
All shall die though none can win;
Let the Untergang begin—

Die the soldiers, die the Jews,
And all the breadless homeless queues.
Give us this day our daily news.

July, 1940

Flight of the Heart

Heart, my heart, what will you do?
There are five lame dogs and one deaf-mute
All of them with demands on you.

I will build myself a copper tower
With four ways out and no way in
But mine the glory, mine the power.

And what if the tower should shake and fall
With three sharp taps and one big bang?
What would you do with yourself at all?

I would go in the cellar and drink the dark
With two quick sips and one long pull,
Drunk as a lord and gay as a lark.

But what when the cellar roof caves in
With one blue flash and nine old bones?
How, my heart, will you save your skin?

I will go back where I belong
With one foot first and both eyes blind,
I will go back where I belong
In the fore-being of mankind.

October, 1940

Refugees

With prune-dark eyes, thick lips, jostling each other
These, disinterred from Europe, throng the deck
To watch their hope heave up in steel and concrete
Powerful but delicate as a swan's neck,

Thinking, each of them, the worst is over
And we do not want any more to be prominent or rich,
Only to be ourselves, to be unmolested
And make ends meet—an ideal surely which

Here if anywhere is feasible. Their glances
Like wavering antennae feel
Around the sliding limber towers of Wall Street
And count the numbered docks and gingerly steal

Into the hinterland of their own future
Behind this excessive annunciation of towers,
Tracking their future selves through a continent of
strangeness.

The liner moves to the magnet; the quay flowers

With faces of people's friends. But these are mostly
Friendless and all they look to meet
Is a secretary who holds his levée among ledgers,
Tells them to take a chair and wait . . .

And meanwhile the city will go on, regardless
Of any new arrival, trains like prayers
Radiating from stations haughty as cathedrals,
Tableaux of spring in milliners' windows, great affairs

Being endorsed on a vulcanite table, lines of washing
Feebly garish among grimy brick and dour
Iron fire-escapes; barrows of cement are rumbling
Up airy planks; a florist adds a flower

To a bouquet that is bound for somebody's beloved
Or for someone ill; in a sombre board-room great
Problems wait to be solved or shelved. The city
Goes on but you, you will probably find, must wait

Till something or other turns up. Something-or-Other
Becomes an expected angel from the sky;
But do not trust the sky, the blue that looks so candid
Is non-committal, frigid as a harlot's eye.

Gangways—the handclasp of the land. The resurrected,
The brisk or resigned Lazaruses, who want
Another chance, go trooping ashore. But chances
Are dubious. Fate is stingy, recalcitrant

And officialdom greets them blankly as they fumble
Their foreign-looking baggage; they still feel
The movement of the ship while through their
imagination
The known and the unheard-of constellations wheel.

September, 1940

Jehu

Peace on New England, on the shingled white houses, on
golden
Rod and the red Turkey carpet spikes of sumach. The
little
American flags are flapping in the graveyard. Continuous
Chorus of grasshoppers. Fleece
Of quiet around the mind. Honey-suckle, phlox and
smoke-bush,
Hollyhocks and nasturtium and corn on the cob. And the
pine wood
Smelling of outmoded peace.

A king sat over the gate looking to the desert. A spiral
Of dust came towards him, a special messenger asking
Anxiously 'Is it peace?' The heavy eyebrows lowered,
He answered 'What have I
To do with peace?' and the messenger mopped the sweat
and obedient
Took his place behind the king who still sat scanning
Miles of desert and sky.

Negative prospect; sand in the lungs; blood in the sand;
deceiving
Mirage of what were once ideals or even motives
And in this desert even a ghost can hardly
Live—but in the long run what
Have I to do with life? He got up blandly, harnessed his
horses
And furiously drove, his eyeballs burning and the
chariot's
Axles burning hot.

Someone sat in a window with a new coiffure, her raddled
Face, a Muse's possibly once but now a harlot's,
Smirked at the charioteer who, looking past her, signalled
 To the maids to throw her down
And they threw her down and the wheels went over her
 ribs and the carcase,
The one-time inspiration of artists, the toast of kings, was
 abandoned
 To the scavenger dogs of the town.

And now the sand blows over Kent and Wales where we
 may shortly
Learn the secret of the desert's purge, of the mad driving,
The cautery of the gangrened soul, though we are not
 certain
 Whether we shall stand beside
The charioteer, the surgeon, or shall be one with the
 pampered
Queen who tittered in the face of death, unable to
 imagine
 The meaning of the flood tide.

August, 1940

O'Connell Bridge

Barrel-organ music:
The cold gold falls
From the lamps on the Liffey
In the chilly wind
And the crinkling river
Shivers the lights,
And night's companions
Are far to find.

Flotsam and jetsam
Our one-while loves
Blown like bubbles
In the trough of the sea,
Who are not the only
Lonely in bed:
I dread the darkness—
A mound on me.

Barrel-organ music—
A hackney cockney tune,
A rain of riches
In a lady's lap;
I give in answer
Not dance or spoken
Token but only
A coin in a cap.

October, 1939

The Death-Wish

It being in this life forbidden to move
Too lightly, people, over-cautious, contrive
To save their lives by weighting them with dead
Habits, hopes, beliefs, anything not alive,
Till all this ballast of unreality sinks
The boat and all our thinking gurgles down
Into the deep sea that never thinks.

Which being so, it is not surprising that
Some in their impatience jump the rails,
Refusing to wait the communal failure, preferring
The way the madman or the meteor fails,
Deceiving themselves to think their death uncommon,
And mad to possess the unpossessable sea
As a man in spring desires to die in woman.

May, 1940

Autobiography

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.

Come back early or never come.

My father made the walls resound,
He wore his collar the wrong way round.

Come back early or never come.

My mother wore a yellow dress;
Gently, gently, gentleness.

Come back early or never come.

When I was five the black dreams came;
Nothing after was quite the same.

Come back early or never come.

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

Come back early or never come.

When I woke they did not care;
Nobody, nobody was there.

Come back early or never come.

When my silent terror cried,
Nobody, nobody replied.

Come back early or never come.

I got up; the chilly sun
Saw me walk away alone.

Come back early or never come.

September, 1940

The Ear

There are many sounds which are neither music nor
voice,

There are many visitors in masks or in black glasses
Climbing the spiral staircase of the ear. The choice
Of callers is not ours. Behind the hedge
Of night they wait to pounce. A train passes,
The thin and audible end of a dark wedge.

We should like to lie alone in a deaf hollow
Cocoon of self where no person or thing would speak;
In fact we lie and listen as a man might follow
A will o' the wisp in an endless eyeless bog,
Follow the terrible drone of a cock chafer, or the bleak
Oracle of a barking dog.

April, 1940

Evening in Connecticut

Equipoise: becalmed
Trees, a dome of kindness;
Only the scissory noise of the grasshoppers;
Only the shadows longer and longer.

The lawn a raft
In a sea of singing insects,
Sea without waves or mines or premonitions:
Life on a china cup.

But turning. The trees turn
Soon to brocaded autumn.
Fall. The fall of dynasties; the emergence
Of sleeping kings from caves—

Beard over the breastplate,
Eyes not yet in focus, red
Hair on the back of the hands, unreal
Heraldic axe in the hands.

Unreal but still can strike.
And in defence we cannot call on the evening
Or the seeming-friendly woods—
Nature is not to be trusted,

Nature whose falls of snow,
Falling softer than catkins,
Bury the lost and over their grave a distant
Smile spreads in the sun.

Not to be trusted, no,
Deaf at the best; she is only
And always herself, Nature is only herself,
Only the shadows longer and longer.

September, 1940

Octets

I

Business Men

The two men talking business
So easily in the train
Project themselves upon me
Just as the window pane

Reflects their faces, and I
Find myself in a trance
To hear two strangers talking
The same language for once.

II

Night Club

After the legshows and the brandies
And all the pick-me-ups for tired
Men there is a feeling
Something more is required.

The lights go down and eyes
Look up across the room;
Salome comes in, bearing
The head of God knows whom.

III

Didymus

Refusing to fall in love with God, he gave
Himself to the love of created things,
Accepting only what he could see, a river
Full of the shadows of swallows' wings

That dipped and skimmed the water; he would not
Ask where the water ran or why.
When he died a swallow seemed to plunge
Into the reflected, the wrong sky.

October-November, 1939

Plurality

It is patent to the eye that cannot face the sun
The smug philosophers lie who say the world is one;
World is other and other, world is here and there,
Parmenides would smother life for lack of air
Precluding birth and death; his crystal never breaks—
No movement and no breath, no progress nor mistakes,
Nothing begins or ends, no-one loves or fights,
All your foes are friends and all your days are nights
And all the roads lead round and are not roads at all
And the soul is muscle-bound, the world a wooden ball.
The modern monist too castrates, negates our lives
And nothing that we do, make or become survives,
His terror of confusion freezes the flowing stream
Into mere illusion, his craving for supreme
Completeness means he chokes each orifice with tight
Plaster as he evokes a dead ideal of white
All-white Universal, refusing to allow
Division or dispersal—Eternity is now
And Now is therefore numb, a fact he does not see
Postulating a dumb static identity
Of Essence and Existence which could not fuse without
Banishing to a distance belief along with doubt,
Action along with error, growth along with gaps;
If man is a mere mirror of God, the gods collapse.
No, the formula fails that fails to make it clear
That only change prevails, that the seasons make the year
That a thing, a beast, a man is what it is because
It is something that began and is not what it was,
Yet is itself throughout, fluttering and unfurled,
Not to be cancelled out, not to be merged in world,
Its entity a denial of all that is not it,

Its every move a trial through chaos and the Pit,
An absolute and so defiant of the One
Absolute, the row of noughts where time is done,
Where nothing goes or comes and Is is one with Ought
And all the possible sums alike resolve to nought.
World is not like that, world is full of blind
Gulfs across the flat, jags against the mind,
Swollen or diminished according to the dice,
Foaming, never finished, never the same twice.
You talk of Ultimate Value, Universal Form—
Visions, let me tell you, that ride upon the storm
And must be made and sought but cannot be maintained,
Lost as soon as caught, always to be regained,
Mainspring of our striving towards perfection, yet
Would not be worth achieving if the world were set
Fair, if error and choice did not exist, if dumb
World should find its voice for good and God become
Incarnate once for all. No, perfection means
Something but must fall unless there intervenes
Between that meaning and the matter it should fill
Time's revolving hand that never can be still.
Which being so and life a ferment, you and I
Can only live by strife in that the living die,
And, if we use the word Eternal, stake a claim
Only to what a bird can find within the frame
Of momentary flight (the value will persist
But as event the night sweeps it away in mist).
Man is man because he might have been a beast
And is not what he was and feels himself increased,
Man is man in as much as he is not god and yet
Hankers to see and touch the pantheon and forget
The means within the end and man is truly man
In that he would transcend and flout the human span:

A species become rich by seeing things as wrong
And patching them, to which I am proud that I belong.
Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
Raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux,
Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux
And so he must continue, raiding the abyss
With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,
Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick
Ego and the broken past and the clock that goes too quick,
Conscious of waste of labour, conscious of spite and hate,
Of dissension with his neighbour, of beggars at the gate,
But conscious also of love and the joy of things and the
power
Of going beyond and above the limits of the lagging hour,
Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death's inveigling
touch,
Not completely conscious but partly—and that is much.

August, 1940

Plain Speaking

In the beginning and in the end the only decent
Definition is tautology: man is man,
Woman woman, and tree tree, and world world,
Slippery, self-contained; catch as catch can.

Which when caught between the beginning and end
Turn other than themselves, their entities unfurled,
Flapping and overlapping—a tree becomes
A talking tower, and a woman becomes world.

Catch them in nets, but either the thread is thin
Or the mesh too big or, thirdly, the fish die
And man from false communion dwindles back
Into a mere man under a mere sky.

But dream was dream and love was love and what
Happened happened—even if the judge said
It should have been otherwise—and glitter glitters
And I am I although the dead are dead.

March, 1940

Perdita

The glamour of the end attic, the smell of old
Leather trunks—Perdita, where have you been
Hiding all these years? Somewhere or other a green
Flag is waving under an iron vault
And a brass bell is the herald of green country
And the wind is in the wires and the broom is gold.

Perdita, what became of all the things
We said that we should do? The cobwebs cover
The labels of Tyrol. The time is over-
Due and in some metropolitan station
Among the clank of cans and the roistering files
Of steam the caterpillars wait for wings.

March, 1940

The Dowser

An inkling only, whisper in the bones
Of strange weather on the way,
Twitch of the eyelid, shadow of a passing bird.
It is coming some time soon.

What? or who? An inkling only,
Adumbration of unknown glory
Drew to the feet of Saint Francis where the waves
Broke, an army of fish.

Humming wires; feel of a lost limb
Cut off in another life;
Trance on the tripod; effulgence
Of headlights beyond the rise in the road.

And the hazel rod bent, dipping, contorting,
Snake from sleep; they were right
Who remembered some old fellow
(Dead long ago) who remembered the well.

'Dig', he said, 'dig',
Holding the lantern, the rod bent double,
And we dug respecting his knowledge,
Not waiting for morning, keenly

Dug: the clay was heavy
Two hours heavy before
The clink of a spade revealed
What or whom? We expected a well—

A well? A mistake somewhere . . .
More of a tomb . . . Anyway we backed away
From the geyser suddenly of light that erupted, sprayed
Rocketing over the sky azaleas and gladioli.

September, 1940

The Return

All the lost interpretations,
All the unconsummated consummations,
All the birds that flew and left the big sky empty
Come back throwing shadows on our patience.

Bethlehem is desolate and the stables
Cobwebbed, mute; below each Tower of Babel's
Sentrydom of night, inside the bleak
Glass of cafés chairs are piled on tables.

Notwithstanding which, notwithstanding
The hospital—the icicles round the landing—
Expecting Birth, we know that it will come
Sooner or later, banding

Together the good daemons, the defiance
And lolloping vulcanite of sea-lions,
The harlequinade of water through a sluice,
Tigers in the air, and in the teeth of science

The acclamation of earth's returning daughter,
Jonquils out of hell, and after
Hell the imperative of joy, the dancing
Fusillade of sunlight on the water.

February, 1940

Cradle Song

Sleep, my darling, sleep;
The pity of it all
Is all we compass if
We watch disaster fall.
Put off your twenty-odd
Encumbered years and creep
Into the only heaven,
The robbers' cave of sleep.

The wild grass will whisper,
Lights of passing cars
Will streak across your dreams
And fumble at the stars;
Life will tap the window
Only too soon again,
Life will have her answer—
Do not ask her when.

When the winsome bubble
Shivers, when the bough
Breaks, will be the moment
But not here or now.
Sleep and, asleep, forget
The watchers on the wall
Awake all night who know
The pity of it all.

October, 1940